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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Youkhana, E., & Sutter, O. (2017). Perspectives on the European border regime: mobilization, contestation and the role of civil society. *Social Inclusion*, 5(3), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.1127>

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Editorial

## **Perspectives on the European Border Regime: Mobilization, Contestation and the Role of Civil Society**

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Submitted: 3 August 2017 | Published: 19 September 2017

### **Abstract**

This issue examines politics and practices that challenge the European border regime by contesting and negotiating asylum laws and regulations, practices of separation in refugee camps and accommodation centers, as much as political acts by undocumented migrants and activists seeking alternative ways of cohabitation. The different contributions all highlight the role of civil society initiatives during the migration movements in 2015 and 2016 in Europe by discussing critical perspectives on the European border regime and by looking at migration as a contesting political force. Topics related to mobilization and the appropriation of public spaces to actively declare one's solidarity, political activism to contest borders and boundary-making approaches (no border movements) and the engagement into voluntary work are critically reflected.

### **Keywords**

border; civil society; contestation; Europe; mobilization

### **Issue**

This editorial is part of the thematic issue "Perspectives on the European border regime: mobilization, contestation, and the role of civil society," edited by Ove Sutter and Eva Youkhana (University of Bonn, Germany).

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In the wake of the "long summer of migration" (Hess et al., 2017) in 2015 when growing numbers of refugees headed to Europe, it became significantly clear that the European border regime does not only consist of discourses, legislations, security politics and practices of integration executed by the European Union (EU) and different member states, combining processes of sociopolitical inclusion of citizens and exclusion of non-communitarians and minorities within the EU. Instead, it should be conceived as a temporary and dynamic arrangement, permanently challenged and contested by migrants, political activists, civil society initiatives and acts of citizenship (Ataç, Rygiel, & Stierl, 2016; Isin, 2009).

Since then, different immigration laws and regulations, politics of externalization (e.g. closing the main flight routes under the pretext of fighting the root causes of migration, cf. Youkhana, 2017) and practices of spa-

tial isolation have triggered conflictive debates among the member states about how to deal with future immigration movements. Not only was the Schengen Agreement put to the test, but also public authorities' capacities to deal with the immediate basic needs and the mid-term requirements for the attempted integration of immigrants into European societies.

According to the German human rights organization "Pro Asyl," there were 442,000 people searching for asylum just in Germany in 2015, most of them from Syria, but also from Albania, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq (Pro Asyl, 2017).<sup>1</sup> At the point of culmination, the mass media took up the widespread "welcome culture" accompanied by the decision of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, in the autumn of 2015, to open the borders for refugees. The "refugees welcome" movement, initiated by activists and solidarity groups, was taken up

<sup>1</sup> The number of refugees coming to Germany amount to 1 million people in 2015 (cf. Fleischmann, 2016).

by many self-organized charity and humanitarian initiatives, which also activated the conservative and the middle class in the areas of migration. This surprising wave of humanitarian volunteering could take over many of the responsibilities for the care and first aid from communities and public authorities overburdened by trying to fulfill the basic needs of the immigrants.

Most of the articles assembled in this issue take up practices of relief and immediate support to refugees. Voluntary initiatives for refugees have been partly criticized and their practices have been controversially discussed not only by scholars in the field of critical migration studies, but also within the initiatives themselves. Some proclaim new forms of political commitment combining practices of humanitarian aid with political activism and the demand of political and social rights for refugees. Some condemned these initiatives as paternalistic neocolonial forms of domination uninterested in removing the unequal relationships between volunteers and refugees. The activist Bino Byanski Byakuleka, for instance, called it “racism of helping” (Byansi Byakuleka & Ulu, 2016). Others criticized that the civic engagement was driven more by emotions than political ideas and, therefore, would depend strongly on public moods (cf. van Dyk & Misbach, 2016). In fact, in the first few months, the media coverage on the “refugee crisis” as well as the widespread civic engagement for refugees in Germany was highly emotionalized (Karakayali & Kleist, 2015; Sutter, 2017; Vis & Goriunova, 2015). Referring to the criticism of humanitarianism, others pointed out that the emotionalized media discourse and the civic engagement relied very much on the image of the refugee as a grateful, innocent and deserving victim, represented ideally by children and women (cf. Karakayali, 2016; van Dyk & Misbach, 2016). Not surprisingly to many, the media and political discourse changed after the reports of attacks on women on New Years’ Eve 2015 in Cologne, allegedly carried out by large crowds of young male migrants.

The media’s coverage took on a controversial role during the time of the migration movements (Hemmelmann & Wegner, 2016). On the one hand, they supported the spontaneous civic engagement for refugees by amplifying its visibility and giving moral support. They played a central role in the emotionalized mobilization of volunteers by framing it as a “humanitarian crisis.” On the other hand, they predicted the breaking points of the German society (Herrmann, 2016), which led to a tightening of the asylum laws in Germany, with Asylpaket I and II (compare Leko in this issue) and in other European countries, and political calls for territorial containment.

The EU member states have, since then, engaged in contentious negotiations about a common strategy to combine immigration policies with security politics, a topic that has moved into the center of the public debate by using the “war against terror” discourse as a justification for more techno-scientific border control (compare Hess & Kasparek, 2017). The European Pact for Immigra-

tion and Asylum from 2008 forms the basis for further harmonizing and synthesizing of the European border regime. The Pact shows the EU’s main objectives, namely, to control irregular migration better and encourage voluntary return, to make border control more effective (FRONTEX), to establish a European framework for asylum and create international partnerships. This Pact has led to the establishment of programs in Germany, such as the “Middle East Employment Drive,” the “Marshall Plan” for reconstructing Syria and Iraq, and the “Emergency Trust Fund” to support African countries to equip their border controls technically (Youkhana, 2017). A developmentalist approach towards migration is replacing the humanitarian access (compare Schwertl, 2017).

Europe, in general, and Germany, especially, need immigration to meet the increasing demand for professionals, mainly in the processing and care industries. European countries suffer from an aging society. The “Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge” (BAMF) stated in 2008 that the birth rate in Germany is low, life expectancy high and that society will suffer from the decreasing employment rates of the German population. These demographic expectations give immigration more attention, as it seems to offer a solution for the increasingly aging population (Shimany, 2008). In spite of an immigration rate of 300,000 in absolute terms, German society would still continue to decrease.

This ambivalence between partitioning Europe from the rest of the world and integrating those immigrants needed for economic growth and social care is also reflected in the political positioning of civil society actors and groups. These range from a lived culture of solidarity and humanitarian support to a new political right, appearing, for example, in PEGIDA (Patriots of Europe against the Islamization of the occident) and AFD (Alternative for Germany) in Germany or the “Identitarian Movement” in several European countries. These movements are increasingly taking over bridgebuilding functions between the traditional right, rather conservative factions and even the center ground, by carrying protest against immigration into the public space. (cf. Vieten & Poynting, 2016) Aid organizations, represented by charity groups, Christian churches and other civil society organizations, are struggling with a clear political positioning on how to deal with the challenges related to the integration of immigrants. At the same time, the “refugees welcome” and “no border” movement are forming solidarity networks and engaging in situated and decentralized political activism together with those immediately affected by segregation, racism and deportation (compare Gauditz, 2017; Leko, 2017).

This volume will broach the issue of politics and practices that challenge the European border regime by contesting and negotiating asylum laws and regulations, practices of separation in refugee camps and accommodation centers, as much as political acts by undocumented migrants and activists seeking alternative ways of cohabitation. The different contributions all highlight

the role of civil society initiatives during the migration movements in 2015 and 2016 in Europe by discussing critical perspectives on the European border regime and by looking at migration as a contesting political force. Topics related to mobilization and the appropriation of public spaces to actively declare one's solidarity, political activism to contest borders and boundary-making approaches (no border movements) and the engagement into voluntary work are critically reflected.

Most of the issue's contributors are involved in their field of research not only as researchers, but also as political activists, for instance, as members of the transnational "Network for Critical Migration and Border Regime Research (kritnet)" or as editors of "Movements," the affiliated journal for critical migration and border studies. Furthermore, all contributions are more or less methodologically and theoretically inspired by the approach of the ethnographic border regime analysis (Hess & Tsianos, 2010), which was developed by the research group "Transit Migration" (Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe, 2007). Thus, the articles all pursue an ethnographic and ethno-methodological approach by zooming into cases of social relations, political incidences, contested legal frameworks and cultural encounters that emerged during and after the 2015 migration movement. The highly contextualized cases unfold a sociopolitical landscape that makes the fragmentation, instability and fragility of the European border and migration regime apparent. The concerns presented of the authors, who actively studied the 2015 migrations, share a critical approach towards conventional scientific perspectives that turn a blind eye to the role migrants play as active protagonists shaping and contesting the European border regime in spite of their displacement, their physical and territorial exclusion and the deprivation of human rights.

Serhat Karakayali (2017) examines the role of emotions within the social interactions between volunteers and asylum seekers in Germany drawing on qualitative interviews and group discussions carried out between 2015 and 2016. Following a narrative approach and referring to examinations of emotions in the area of social movement studies, he discusses the connection between emotions, reasoning and the construction of social bonds that are capable of reshaping current modes of belonging. Karakayali argues that some volunteers avoid becoming emotionally involved and, therefore, state a kind of emotional management, while others highlight their experiences of an "empowerment" which they connect with feelings of happiness. Regarding the engagement's capacity to reshape social bonds, he concludes that the scope of solidarity seems to remain narrow. Volunteers frame their engagement more regarding local and national issues than connecting it to transnational dynamics of migration and, thus, a transnational scope of solidarity. Instead of expanding already existing social bonds towards asylum seekers, the civic engagement seems to maintain or reconstitute social relationships among volunteers.

Based on their ethnographic fieldwork, Larissa Fleischmann and Elias Steinhilper (2017) also examine the civic engagement for refugees as it occurred in Germany in the second half of 2015. By focusing on the engagement of volunteers belonging to the middle class with no personal history of political activism, the authors claim that the image of migration as a humanitarian crisis, as spread by the media and the political discourse, especially mobilized broader parts of the German population. At the same time, they argue that the volunteering for refugees should not be conceived as apolitical as claimed by the media discourse and by many volunteers themselves. To debunk the myth of apolitical helping and drawing on Michel Foucault, Fleischmann and Steinhilper argue that a new "dispositive of helping" emerged from the civic engagement for refugees consisting of different political dynamics. On the one hand, the humanitarian volunteering tends to reproduce inequalities and hierarchies which exist already and, therefore, becomes an accomplice of the repressive politics within the European migration regime. On the other hand, the broad range of different actors has the potential to contest and transform the politics of migration by creating new spaces of encounters and political subjectivities, as well as intervening in the public discourse.

Sara de Jong and Ilker Ataç (2017) also highlight the political potentials of spaces of encounter as a result of civic engagement for refugees. Drawing on their explorative inquiry of four Austrian organizations in the field of aid for refugees, they argue that these organizations occupy a space between NGOs and social movements which yields specific modes of action. De Jong and Ataç's biographical interrogations of the four organization's founders reveal how the latter's former engagement in social movements and NGOs helped them to identify gaps within the provision of services for refugees. Furthermore, the authors suggest that these organizations combine their service with a radical critique of the public asylum system's "organized disintegration" and, in doing so, create spaces of encounter. These spaces of encounter challenge and undermine the asylum system in four different ways: Firstly, they insist on the refugee's right to not only having access to basic supply, but to a social space of encounter independent from their status of citizenship. Secondly, the spaces of encounter are contrary to the public authorities' politics of isolation and segregation. Thirdly, they create new forms of belonging, solidarity and responsibility and, finally, these spaces of encounter urge volunteers to understand the refugees' situation in a more political manner and to participate in their political struggles.

Katherine Braun (2017) looks at the social relations and cultural encounters between volunteers and refugees immediately after the refugees' arrival in Germany. She shows that expectations of gratitude for charitable practices and the volunteers' everyday engagement within the welcome culture do not always match the reaction of the refugees. Instead, the feedback is dis-

appointing and creates bewildering situations at which mechanisms of “othering” are triggered. Giving two examples of situations of everyday encounters in refugee camps, Katherine Braun explores the feelings of the church-related volunteers, often middle-aged females, who feel offended when their best intentions are not properly appreciated. The author shows these conflictive spaces by conducting a situational analysis that allows for a visualization of hidden agendas and asymmetric power relations. These, in the author’s point of view, are embedded in a “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo, 2011) within which the volunteers’ humanitarian idealism coincides with a claim of paternalism, or better, maternalism towards the immigrants.

Leslie Gauditz (2017) examines the everyday practices of anarchist-autonomous and refugee activists within the “no border” movement who follow a radical political approach shaped by a decolonial and anti-capitalist critique of the nation state. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Greece and Germany, Gauditz discusses how activists attempt to translate their ideological ideas into their daily routines. Similar to de Jong and Ataç and Fleischmann and Steinhilper, she argues that activists create spaces of “activist encounter,” for instance, in temporary and self-organized camp sites, squatted buildings or public squares, where they aim at prefigurative political strategies in terms of experiencing new egalitarian practices of sociality. By doing so, they interpret their everyday conflicts as effects of “a global system of inequality” and, thus, link them to broader political struggles.

Sabine Hess and Bernd Kasperek (2017) analyze the processes which led up to the migration movements of 2015 and 2016, as well as the subsequent and ongoing attempts to re-stabilize the European border regime. They reject the concept of the events of 2015 and 2016 as a “refugee crisis” and, by contrast, argue that the European border regime is in a permanent and inherent condition of crisis, as it is constantly contested by the movements of migration. Hence, they emphasize the approach of ethnographic border regime analysis, which conceives a border as an effect of performative practices carried out by a wide range of human and non-human actors and, thus, focuses on the everyday micro-practices of “doing border.” Hess and Kasperek outline three external and internal events that led up to the migration movements of 2015 and, therefore, to the destabilization of the European border regime to underscore their argument: the democratic uprisings in the Arab world of 2011, the crisis of the Dublin Regulation and the humanitarianization of the border following the deaths of hundreds of refugees near the island of Lampedusa in 2013. Drawing on their current ethnographic study in the Aegean region, they argue that the border regime will also remain conflictive in the future.

Focusing on the nexus of migration and development, Maria Schwertl (2017) presents two initiatives of migrants from Ghana and Cameroon living in Ger-

many. She follows the traces of their activities and analyzes the motivations, requests and micro-politics of the migrants themselves by using a multi-cited ethnographic approach. She, thus, combines two scientific perspectives, namely, the autonomy of migration approach (AoM) and the migration and border regime analysis (MBRA). Both approaches are being addressed by scholars of different disciplines and originate in critical migration studies that aim at putting the agency of migrants into the center of the study. In lieu of applying a macro perspective on migration and defining migration as an issue of good governance and economic development (as is often done when focusing on resources flows, for example, of remittances), Maria Schwertl argues that these initiatives are often delinked from any strategy to develop home communities. They reflect more the solidarity and closeness to those stay at homes, which requires more ethical considerations when studying the nexus of migration and development.

Jure Leko’s (2017) take on the topic of the European border regime is somehow different to the other contributions, as he looks at communarians from the Balkan states, namely the Roma, who are being excluded from refugee rights. He shows how the Roma, specifically as a minority group, have been affected by social and economic disintegration, successive tensions between ethnic groups and the violation of human rights by describing the history of their migration within Europe, starting with the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s. He argues that the civil wars in the 1990s in the Western Balkans strengthened the latent oppression and factual discrimination of Roma in the region. Based on an analysis of laws and regulations of the German migration regime and the related discourses, collective knowledge production and practices of the Roma, Jure Leko studies their struggle for recognition as refugees and asylum seekers. Having participated and observed activities and events of the Roma protest movement, he applied a multi-sited ethnographic approach to analyze how Romani migrants in Germany translate and appropriate human rights within a framework of increasing stereotyping and racism against them. He shows that their creative protest, which he illustrates by exploring the occupation of a memorial for the Sinti and Roma victims of National Socialism in Berlin in the year 2016, challenges the German migration regime and paves the way for a more reflected and visible debate about the continuity of social exclusion and prosecution of Europeans within Europe.

### Acknowledgments

We want to thank all the authors for their dedicated work and their exceptional contributions to make this thematic issue a successful joint project. We also want to express our gratitude to the reviewers and their thoughtful feedback on a former stage of the papers as well as the patience and consecutive support of the editors of Social Inclusion.



## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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